

Years after his riveting 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech, Bryan still attracted huge audiences, like this one, circa 1910.



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William Jennings Bryan and His "Cross of Gold" Speech

by Robert W. Cherny

When television crews set up their cameras at a presidential nominating convention and network anchors gather in their booths, it is only a matter of time before someone alludes to William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech at the 1896 Democratic convention as the leading example of an orator's ability to sway listeners. In 1953, a poll of 277 professors of American history or government ranked Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech among the fifty most significant documents in American history. A century after Bryan delivered the speech, his words still have power, and some of his metaphors have passed into the common idiom.

Born in Salem, Illinois, in 1860, Bryan grew up in a devoutly religious household. His mother, Mariah, came from the locally prominent Jennings family and was active in the Methodist Church. His father, Silas Bryan, a lawyer and judge of the circuit court, was a prayerful Baptist and a committed advocate of the Democratic party. Bryan, at the age of fourteen, joined the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, then moved to a mainstream Presbyterian denomination upon leaving Salem. He disappointed his father in his choice of church, but no such apostasy marked his choice of political parties—he was a Democrat all his life. After graduating from Illinois College and Union Law School and marrying his college sweetheart Mary Baird, Bryan practiced law briefly in Jacksonville, Illinois, then moved his law practice and his family to Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1887.

In Nebraska, Bryan plunged into Democratic party

politics and won election to the House of Representatives in 1890. Democrats had rarely won elections in Nebraska over the previous quarter century, but Bryan was aided by two unusual circumstances. First, a new party emerged, soon to be called the Populists, attacking the older parties and demanding governmental action to assist hard-pressed farmers and urban workers. In Bryan's congressional district, the new party drew a number of votes that might otherwise have gone to the Republican candidate. Second, Nebraskans voted on a referendum to prohibit alcohol, actuating an all-out campaign by the opponents of Prohibition, especially in the "wringing-wet" metropolis of Omaha, then part of Bryan's district. Personally a teetotaler, Bryan nonetheless endorsed his party's strong opposition to Prohibition, and he benefited from the antiprohibitionists' work to mobilize wet voters.

Leaving their three children in the care of Mary's parents, the Bryans formed a strong team on Capitol Hill. Mary followed public issues closely, and the *Washington Post* commented that "her judgment is excellent." The two of them always worked closely together—she had been admitted to the Nebraska bar in 1888 to assist with his law practice and at home they had a desk designed so that one of them could sit on either side to facilitate their cooperative endeavors. With Bryan a congressman, they now worked together on his speeches. When Bryan rose to speak on the floor of the House, Mary sat in the visitors' gallery, coaching him by nodding her head or signaling disapproval.

Though Bryan's winning campaign in 1890 concentrated on tariff issues, he also endorsed "free coinage of silver on equal terms with gold." That issue soon loomed larger in the nation's politics. By 1892, when he sought reelection, Bryan had emerged as a prominent spokesman for what had become known simply as "silver."

"Silver" was, in fact, an argument for a federal currency policy that would counteract the long-term deflationary tendencies of the post-Civil War era. From 1865 onward, most prices had fallen, due partly to more efficient production in agriculture and manufacturing, partly to a persistent federal surplus, and partly to the failure of the money supply to grow as rapidly as the population. Some who focused on the last of these argued that the government could stabilize prices by issuing more currency—they reasoned that inflation came about when the currency supply grew more rapidly than the economy, and, conversely, that deflation occurred when the currency supply failed to grow as rapidly as the economy. What was needed, they concluded, was a currency that grew in proportion to the population.

From the 1870s onward, those who called for the federal government to expand the currency found their most receptive audience among farmers in debt. After the Civil War, farmers in the western Midwest and the South had greatly increased their harvests of corn, wheat, and cotton. As production rose, prices fell. Farmers had accomplished much of their expansion on borrowed money and their high level of indebtedness increased their dependence on cash crops to make their mortgage payments.

Falling crop prices magnified a farmer's debt. For example, a farmer in 1881 who borrowed \$1,000 expected to pay interest each year and to repay the full amount at the end of five years. (Loans then were not amortized.) Corn sold for 63 cents per bushel, at best, in 1881, so the \$1,000 loan was equivalent to 1,587 bushels of corn; in 1886, when the loan came due, corn sold for 36 cents per bushel, so \$1,000 required 2,777 bushels. Ten percent interest would have cost \$100 per year—159 bushels of corn in 1881 but 312 in 1885. Thus, falling prices pushed farmers to raise more and more each year, and the more they raised, the lower prices fell. Like the character in *Alice in Wonderland*, they had to run faster and faster just to stay in the same place.

Such debtor farmers quickly understood and readily embraced the promise of an expanded money supply that would stabilize prices. As Bryan put it in 1893, those who opposed currency expansion wanted to make "a man pay a debt with a dollar larger than the one he borrowed. . . . They loaned money, and now they want more than they loaned." He also presented the issue in regional terms. "We simply say to the East [the nation's financial center]," he told a Kansas City crowd in 1891, "take your hands out of

our pockets and keep them out." In 1894, he wrote a platform for Nebraska Democrats that argued that the government should "make the dollar so stable in its purchasing power that it will defraud neither debtor nor creditor."

From the 1870s onward, the advocates of inflation had looked to two sources for additional circulating currency—"greenbacks" (the paper money first issued during the Civil War) and silver dollars. Throughout the late 1870s and the 1880s, a minor political party known as the Greenbackers had advocated more paper money but failed to gain a significant following, due partly to distrust of paper money that could not be redeemed in a precious metal. In 1873, Congress specified that the Mint could coin only gold into dollars, thereby putting the United States on a de facto gold standard, something many bankers and some Treasury officials agreed was necessary for full American participation in the international economy and necessary, specifically, to encourage continued foreign investment. In response to agitation over the currency issue, however, Congress provided for limited coinage of silver dollars after 1877. But prices continued to fall and inflationists argued that unlimited silver coinage had the potential to counteract the deflation. In the 1892 presidential election, the Populist party attracted one voter out of twelve with a platform of far-reaching reforms, including currency expansion.

Three elements stand out in the Populists' analysis of the political economy. The first element dated at least to Andrew Jackson, as Populist campaigners again and again proclaimed their opposition to concentrations of economic power. Jay Burrows, a Nebraska Populist, wrote that corporations had made "the toiling millions" into "the tools of a few plutocrats." For the Populists, concentrations of economic power—railroads and grain markets were the most obvious to Nebraska farmers—posed dangers to economic opportunity for the individual as well as to political liberty. To control monopoly, the second element in their program, Populists called for more governmental involvement in the economy, specifically, for federal ownership of the railroads and of the telegraph and telephone systems and for government alternatives to savings banks. "We believe the time has come," they proclaimed in their 1892 platform, "when the railroad companies will either own the people or the people must own the railroads." Their 1892 platform also demanded inflation—through either greenbacks, silver, or both—and a graduated income tax to replace the tariff. Populists argued—the third element in their analysis—that the people had to bring government itself more closely under their control, and they proposed a range of reforms including the secret ballot, the direct election of United States senators, and direct election of the president and vice-president.

Reelected in 1892, Bryan rapidly emerged as silver's most eloquent defender in Congress the following year when President Grover Cleveland asked Congress to end all silver coinage. Active in Nebraska state politics, he identified silver both as the issue which most distinguished his faction of the state Democratic party from the conservatives who controlled the state party organization, and as the most promising common ground with the state's Populists, whom he had viewed as potential allies from the beginning. In 1893, he worked hard to persuade the Democrats in the Nebraska legislature to help elect a Populist to the U.S. Senate. In 1894, Bryan convinced Nebraska Democrats to endorse the Populist candidate for governor as the best way to defeat the Republican candidate, who was known to be anti-Catholic. Both times, the Populists won.

Having twice swung Democratic support behind Populist candidates, Bryan hoped that a similar fusion might elect him to the Senate in 1895, but those hopes foundered on a Republican majority in the state legislature. Bryan then joined the *Omaha World-Herald* (the state's leading Democratic newspaper) as an editorialist and reporter, and he traveled the nation speaking on the silver issue. He also celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday, making him constitutionally eligible to seek the presidency.

Early in 1896, Bryan wrote to prominent Populists urging all silver advocates to unite for the upcoming presidential campaign. He also suggested that the Populists schedule their national nominating convention following those of the Republicans and Democrats; that way, if both major parties rejected silver, the Populists could rally all silverites, including Democrats and Republicans, behind their banner. Bryan probably cherished another scenario as well—if the Democrats were to nominate a silver advocate, it would be essential that the Populists not already have a separate ticket in the field. Nearly two months earlier, Bryan had confided to a close political ally that he considered his own nomination possible if silver Democrats controlled their party's convention.

Throughout the first half of 1896, Bryan traveled the country making speeches and working toward two goals: first, silver delegates must comprise the majority of the Democratic convention; second, they must remain uncommitted to any of the leading candidates. By advocating that states send delegates committed to silver but not committed to specific candidates, Bryan knew that he was making it difficult, perhaps impossible, for any candidate to come to the convention with the two-thirds majority necessary to take the nomination. At the same time, his mail brought offers of support from across the South and West. When all the delegates had been chosen, silver claimed the majority, and most of the silver delegates found

a complete set of Bryan's speeches in their mailboxes.

While Bryan bent all his efforts toward keeping the Democratic convention open, William McKinley was tightly locking up the Republican nomination. Bryan attended the GOP convention, in St. Louis, as a reporter for the *World-Herald*. Author of the highly protectionist tariff of 1890, McKinley blamed the Democrats for the depressed economic conditions since 1893 and presented the protective tariff as the cure. He avoided the money question until shortly before the convention, then agreed to a platform commitment to "the existing gold standard." When the convention adopted that gold plank, a group of silver supporters left the convention hall and their party. Their action delighted Bryan, for it pointed to the fulfillment of his hope for unity of all silver supporters.

In Chicago, the Democrats' platform committee, dominated by silverites, drafted a report at odds with the policies of President Grover Cleveland, a conservative Democrat; a minority of the committee favored a platform that opposed silver and applauded Cleveland. To defend the majority report before the convention, the committee chairman designated Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina and Bryan.

The convention took up the platform before it turned to nominating candidates. Tillman wanted to close the debate, but Bryan persuaded him to lead off instead. Bryan later recorded that "I was more effective in a brief speech in conclusion than in a long speech that simply laid down propositions for another to answer." Bryan sat with the Nebraska delegation on the floor of the convention, sucking a lemon to clear his throat, while the early speakers droned on. Tillman harangued for nearly an hour, then came three conservatives advocating the minority report. Only the first of them aroused much enthusiasm and, when the last finished, Bryan sprang from his seat and bounded to the platform. He raised his right arm and bade the crowd be quiet. A wave of anticipation swept the hall as the silver delegates eagerly waited for Bryan to put their emotions into words. He did not fail them.

He began with a modest disclaimer of his own oratorical abilities as compared to those who had preceded him, a technique he used to emphasize issues rather than personalities. As he developed his major points, Bryan later recalled, "the audience seemed to rise and sit down as one man. At the close of a sentence it would rise and shout, and when I began upon another sentence, the room was as still as church."

He defended the full range of reforms in the platform, giving special attention to the income tax, which he had also championed in Congress. The money issue, he insisted, was but the starting point for economic reform. In advocating that his party stand with the people rather than

"the idle holders of idle capital," he presented a metaphor that his party was to employ again and again through the twentieth century. "There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them."

Bryan's conclusion was the dramatic high point. "Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns." Bryan raked his fingers down his temples. "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." He stretched his arms straight out from his sides as if on a cross and stood silent for a moment, then dropped his arms and took a step back.

The delegates sat in stunned silence as Bryan began to return to the floor, then the demonstration came, shaking the hall for a half hour. Delegates carried Bryan around the hall on their shoulders, and others came to him to shout their support for the nomination. Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech achieved instant immortality.

The speech accomplished its effect as much by the occasion and the style as by the content. The anxious silver delegates knew they had the majority but many were only weakly committed to a candidate. Bryan later described the need of the moment as "to put into words the sentiments of a majority of the delegates." He proved ideal for the task. His voice, a carefully cultivated and powerful instrument, could reach into every part of the great convention hall, an important ability in a day before electronic amplification. Many of his most striking phrases had been tested, revised, and retested in earlier speeches. He had spent his time during the train trip to Chicago organizing his thoughts in expectation of an opportunity to speak. Anticipating his opponents' arguments, he made final plans the night before, summoning his best metaphors from hundreds of rehearsals. On the convention floor, he stood forth as what he called "the voice of a triumphant majority." The speech transformed Bryan from a presumptuous youngster in the rear ranks of the peripheral candidates into a top contender for the nomination. Since then, his performance has been the standard example of the ability of an orator to sway a convention.

Bryan realized his hope for uniting the silver forces when the Populists and Silver Republicans made him their nominee. The marvelous speaking voice that gave him the

nomination became his major campaign instrument, as he traveled eighteen thousand miles by train, visited twenty-six states and more than two hundred and fifty cities and towns, and spoke to as many as five million people. Mary was usually by his side.

When the voters had their say in November, Bryan got almost six and one-half million votes, more than any previous candidate, and he carried twenty-two of the forty-five states. McKinley, however, received more than seven million votes, and the twenty-three states that he carried gave him a large majority in the electoral college. Republicans had usually enjoyed electoral college majorities from 1860 onward, but McKinley's victory marked the first time in twenty-four years that a Republican received a popular majority. For more than twenty years, national politics had been stalemated as neither party commanded a working majority, but McKinley's victory initiated a third of a century of Republican dominance in national politics. Bryan lost the presidency twice more, in 1900 and 1908, but he remained the most significant leader of the Democratic party until the nomination of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, a period of party leadership almost unmatched in American political history.

As a political leader, Bryan had a sincere and unshakable confidence in the ability of the people to govern themselves, and his confidence in the people was reciprocated in the form of a popular following with few parallels in American politics. This large following gave Bryan a significant role in the passage of such reforms as the income tax, direct election of senators, prohibition, and woman suffrage. Under Bryan's leadership, the Democratic party jettisoned most of the commitment to minimal government that had been the party's most prominent characteristic from Andrew Jackson to Grover Cleveland. Instead, Bryan and his allies fused Jacksonian antimonopolism to a commitment to governmental intervention on behalf of "the people" and against powerful economic interests. "A private monopoly," he never tired of repeating, "is indefensible and intolerable." As Bryan argued passionately for the use of an activist state to defend ordinary citizens from the monopolies and trusts of his day, he laid the basis for the activist twentieth-century Democratic party—the party of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson. ♦

Robert W. Cherny is professor of history at San Francisco State University and author of A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan. This article by Cherny was written as an introduction to a publication commemorating the centennial of Bryan's speech. Reprinted from The Cross of Gold by Williams Jennings Bryan by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1996 by the University of Nebraska Press.